

2020-04-29

A Case for Auto/Biography

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<http://hdl.handle.net/10026.1/15160>

10.1007/978-3-030-31974-8_1

Palgrave Macmillan

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Parsons, J.M., and Chappell, A. (2020) Chapter 1: 'A Case for Auto/Biography' in Parsons, J.M., and Chappell, A (eds) *Palgrave Handbook of Auto/Biography*, Palgrave MacMillan, Basingstoke. Accepted for publication and sent to press on 6th September 2019, due for publication Feb/March 2020.

Chapter 1: A Case for Auto/Biography

by Julie Parsons and Anne Chappell

Introduction

In this chapter we make a case for auto/biography, as it lies at the heart of the sociological imagination, emphasising as it does the links between biography and history, the public and the private (Mills 1959). We consider both auto/biography as an epistemological orientation and a methodological approach. This involves reflection on the field of auto/biography, as well as specific reflections on auto/biographical research in practice. To begin we provide a very brief history of auto/biography as we understand it in the social sciences.

Following Durkheim's work in 1897, in the early 1900s there was a range of academic work that started to focus on the lives of people and the different means by which those lives could be explored (Thomas and Znaniecki, 1918); Thomas and Thomas, 1928; Mills, 1959). Erben noted this work as key within the Chicago School (1998a) as providing an important basis for the development of auto/biography as a field of study. What followed later were key works such as 'Documents of Life' (Plummer, 1983), 'Time and Narrative' (Ricoeur, 1984), 'Destiny Obscure' (1984) and 'A History of Private Lives' (Prost and Vincent, 1991) which explored the underpinnings of the auto/biographical in relation to different lives, the ways in which those lives were recorded, and theories for how they could be understood and subsequently represented. This work laid the foundation for Michael Erben, David Morgan and Liz Stanley

to convene the British Sociological Association's Auto/Biography Study Group in 1992. The group was committed to understanding lives because, as Stanley (1993a: 2) notes:

Lives are an interesting place to be, partly because there are so few areas of work in the social sciences and humanities which do not involve auto/biography in one form or another, but perhaps mainly because the auto/biographical forms a radical departure – truly a reconceptualisation – in the way we think and work as well as in the subject matter we deal with.

At the time, Stanley suggested that auto/biography was essential for the social sciences as:

..maximally it mounts a principled and concerted attack on conventional views that 'works' are separate from lives, that there can be an epistemology which is not ontologically based. That science can be objective. Auto/biography intends an epistemological revolution within the social sciences (Stanley, 1994: i).

In order to initiate this 'revolution' the group convenors began publishing a bulletin in 1992 and held a conference that led to a special issue of Sociology in 1993. The bulletin became a self-published journal in 1994 and was then picked up by a publisher in 1998. In 2007 the publication changed to the Auto/Biography Yearbook. The work of the group sat alongside, but discrete from, the developing fields of narrative, biography, and life history, amongst others.

The material in the journals has consistently been rich, interdisciplinary and challenging in nature, edited from 1998 to the present day by Andrew Sparkes whilst Jenny Byrne, Gill Clarke and Michael Erben have led on maintaining the pattern of two conferences a year. Alongside this there have been a range of significant books, including monographs published by the study group, that have contributed directly and significantly to the field of auto/biography (Stanley, 1992; Morgan, 1996; Evans, 1999; Plummer, 2001; Sparkes, 2002; Clarke, 2008; Abbott, 2009;

Tamboukou, 2010c; Byrne, 2012; Stanley, 2013, Letherby, 2014; Dickinson and Erben, 2016). In addition, there have been an array of journal articles and conference presentations related to auto/biography beyond those of the study group, which David Morgan recently noted in his reflections on the work of the group (2019). The legacy of the study group is key to the work presented here. This book demonstrates how auto/biographical work continues to offer a significant provocation in social science research.

It seems fitting that in order to introduce the Palgrave Handbook of Auto/Biography that Anne and I say something about ourselves in relation to auto/biography. Yet, there can be problems with beginnings, with where to start. Every time we consider a beginning, we have to contemplate the ending and what purpose this particular beginning serves. What stories do we want to tell and how do we represent ourselves within them? What are our multiple subject positions, the academic self, social researcher, sociologist, feminist, lecturer, teacher, student and/or mother, wife, daughter? What needs to be known about us, as researchers in order to evaluate our research, this book and how can this be known? Or as Elliot (2011: 1) asks ‘how, as researchers, do we notice ourselves in ways which make the interpretative selves visible?’ It is through the writing of the self and the narratives that we construct about these selves that our identities are ‘forged, rehearsed and remade’ (Lee and Bould, 2003: 188). It is, therefore, in the act of ‘doing’ auto/biography that connections and re-connections are made. Hence, the ‘auto’, or personal experience, and ‘biography’, or life story, are significant in re-authorising subjectivity and experience (Mintz 2016). These generative texts provide a storied reworking of the self, situated and contextualised, yet simultaneously blurring perceived boundaries between self/other and the public/private (Sheridan 1993).

In this context auto/biography is both a method and a text, it is a noun and a verb. Moreover,

the forward slash in auto/biography is deliberate and distinguishes it from autobiography.

Indeed, as Liz Stanley, one of the founding members of the study group, explains:

auto-slash-biography... disputes the conventional genre distinction between biography and autobiography as well as the divisions between self/other, public/private, and immediacy/memory... (Stanley 1993b: 42)

Auto/biography is not simply a shorthand representation of autobiography and/or biography but is a recognition of the inter-dependence of the two enterprises, as David Morgan (another founding member of the BSA Auto/Biography study group) notes:

In writing another's life we also write or rewrite our own lives; in writing about ourselves we also consider ourselves as somebody different from the person who routinely and unproblematically inhabits and moves through social space and time... (Morgan 1998: 655)

Following the work of Mills (1959) an auto/biographical approach concerns the development of a 'sociological imagination' that enables individuals to look at the familiar in social life and see it afresh, to emphasise how 'the social scientist is not some autonomous being standing outside of society' (Mills 1959: 204), but is shaped by biography, history and social structure. It is therefore, particularly prescient in a neo-liberal era of heightened individualism that auto/biography enables analysis of 'the self' within its wider context. It draws on narrative analysis and epistolary traditions. It encourages reflexivity and reflection. However, whilst auto/biography might consider 'the self' a source of analysis, it is not self-indulgent. Instead, as Gayle Letherby argues the 'self' is a 'resource for helping to make sense of the lives of others [because] it is always present and inseparable from the work we produce' (Letherby 2003: 96). Mills (1959) argues that scholars should learn:

... to use your life experience in your intellectual work: continually to examine it and interpret it. In this sense craftsmanship [sic] is the centre of yourself and you are personally involved in every intellectual product upon which you [...] work (Mills 1959: 216).

Some of the key themes within auto/biography as practised within the social sciences relate to issues of epistemology, methodology, reflexivity, position and power. For example, in Letherby's extensive cannon of auto/biographical work (Letherby 1993, Letherby 2002, Letherby 2010, Letherby 2015 amongst others) the personal is political (Andrews, 2007; Hanisch 2009) and there is an overt epistemological concern with a positioning of the self, and a commitment to a form of theorised subjectivity (Letherby 2003, 2013). Indeed, in Stanley's (2019) rationale for the development of the BSA A/B study group she explains how the group developed due to some of the issues she was grappling with at the time, notably:

...on the one hand reflexivity in an auto/biographical form, and on the other being interested in what I would now call everyday documents of life like diaries, autobiographies, biographies, testimonies and letters... There was nothing like it in sociology at that time. I knew about a/b, but it was not widely available in Britain, was largely arts and humanities, and I felt strongly there was a need for a social science perspective on such matters. Also, the sociological term auto/biography expresses the epistemological matters and issues, whereas the US journal used it descriptively just to include biographies and autobiographies, which I thought unsatisfactory.

There are links here between auto/biography and autoethnography, which is:

an autobiographical genre of writing and research that displays multiple layers of consciousness, connecting the personal to the cultural... autoethnographers vary in their emphasis on the research process (graphy), on culture (ethnos) and on self (auto) (Ellis and Bochner (2000: 739-740).

Indeed, Brennan and Letherby (2017) argue for a continuum within auto/biography, suggesting that:

When academics write about themselves, but acknowledge the significance of others, their work could be labelled auto/biography (what some might call autoethnography (see for example Ellis and Bochner 2000, Jackson and Mazzei 2008). When writing about others but recognising the subjectivity of the biographer, auto/biography is more appropriate. Our use of ‘continuum’ acknowledges that concentration on the self OR on the other is not clear cut and that, whether conscious or unconsciously ‘slippage’ often occurs (Brennan and Letherby, 2017: 159).

Moreover, it is these epistemological matters or how epistemology matters that link the sections in this book. Auto/Biography provides a richness that crosses , as well as tests, interdisciplinary and multi-disciplinary boundaries. It asks whether it is possible to separate the self from our research encounters and, if not, how much of the ‘self ‘ do we include? Do we write ourselves in or out? Where are the boundaries of self and other and how might these be constructed, maintained or dissolved? These are important considerations in light of Frosh’s suggestion that there is ‘no knowledge of the other without the engagement of the self’ (Frosh, 2001: 630). Hence auto/biographical work is often ethnographic or autobiographical but not always. It does however retain an epistemological challenge to what it means to be. For example, in Tamboukou’s work (2010a, 2010b) on epistolary traditions there are glimpses of her embodied, corporeal senses, which are interwoven or folded into the narratives of the other. It is the revealing of her embodied self in the research process that enlivens these biographical accounts. This does not detract from the rigour of her work but adds richness, texture and authenticity. In her work she is looking for:

...rich heterogeneities, narrative forms of becoming [and] a musical repetition that draws circles within the chaos of correspondence [that] is soothing for both the researcher and the reader (Tamboukou, 2010a: 8).

There are therefore many benefits in adopting an auto/biographical approach, not least in that

it exposes the interconnectedness and interdependence of biography with autobiography, the self with other. This book is particularly and specifically concerned with auto/biography which sits within the field of narrative, complementing biographical and life history research. As Burnett suggests ‘the outstanding merit of [auto/biography] lies in the fact that it is the direct, personal record of the individual’ (1984: xi). In providing this record, the individual will choose to note, sometimes reflexively, through an account of an experience that which is significant or important to them. Frank (2013) suggests that auto/biography is both personal and social and we recognise here the uniqueness of the account given by an individual in relation to both themselves and the audience. This may result in an account of events that is ‘partial’ but nonetheless valid in representing that which is constituted as valuable to the individual. Stanley talks of the ways in which auto/biography can provide the reader with ‘exemplary lives’ (1992, 12). Here we are interested in auto/biographies that may or may not be exemplary but tell us things about the lives that people understand that they live and the implications of this for our understanding of the human condition (Arendt, 1998; Evans 1999).

Generally speaking, auto/biography is concerned with “the myriad of everyday and frequently fleeting social practices concerned with the articulation of (often competing, sometimes discontinuous) notions of ‘selves’ and ‘lives’” Stanley (1992: 40). An auto/biographical approach therefore often has an explicit:

epistemologically oriented concern with the political ramifications of the shifting boundaries between self and other, past and present in writing and reading, fact and fiction (with) the researcher and author very much alive as agents actively at work in the textual production process” (Stanley, 1992: 41).

Yet, as Richardson (1997: 2) reminds us, we are often ‘restrained and limited by the kinds of cultural stories available to us.’ In academic writing we are encouraged to ‘adhere to the canons

of writing practices' from the nineteenth century that we should not be present in our texts and that the 'I' should be suppressed (1997: 2-3). In taking an auto/biographical approach on the other hand 'I' state that 'I' am present. Instead, we therefore ask, 'how do we write ourselves into our texts with intellectual and spiritual integrity? (Richardson, 1997: 2)'

Indeed, one of the appeals of an auto/biographical approach lies in its overt positioning of the researcher, the 'self' within the research process. It explores the intricacies of the relationship between this 'self' and 'other.' It is a search for 'meaning', an attempt at understanding the motivations and to interpret the intentions that lie behind the construction of a 'life-history'. Thus, an auto/biographical approach highlights the interdependence of the two enterprises of autobiography and biography. Moreover, life history narratives 'give a means to understand identity in its sociality, since narrative identity places us within a complex web of relationships and, ultimately confounds the notion of the atomized individual' (Lawler 2008: 13). Individuals draw on wider cultural narratives and symbols in the telling of their stories, and it is these interconnections that an auto/biographical approach helps to explore. Indeed, as Letherby notes:

. . . self conscious auto/biographical writing acknowledges the social location of the writer thus making clear the author's role in constructing rather than discovering the story/the knowledge (Mykhalovskiy 1996, Stanley 1993) (Letherby 2000a: 90).

An auto/biographical approach also acknowledges that 'the self is always present and inseparable from the work we produce' (Letherby, 2003: 83). Hence, researchers adopting an auto/biographical approach tend to acknowledge the role of reflexivity in their work, one that is 'respectful [of] respondents and acknowledges the subjective involvement of the researcher' (Letherby, 2003: 83). Thus, for some, when doing auto/biography, the researcher takes on the

position of a ‘key informer’ in the context of the research project, acknowledging the role of their own auto/biography throughout. This may or may not be the research focus, but it is used to ‘bridge the gap between the lived experience and academic knowledge production’ (Inckle, 2007: 32). There are risks inherent in this approach, as the process of becoming a ‘research subject as well as author, risks exposure and vulnerability’ for the researcher (Inckle, 2007: 31, Liamputtong, 2007). Some of the emotional risks of ‘exposure and vulnerability’ are well documented amongst academics engaged in auto/biographical approaches (Cotterill and Letherby 1993, Inckle 2005, 2010, Letherby, 2003, Letherby 2013, Sparkes, 2004, 2007, Chappell *et al.*, 2014). Yet, as Letherby claims the power balance in the respondent/researcher relationship is not static; it is fluid and dynamic (Cotterill and Letherby 1993, Letherby 2003, Letherby 2013, Ludhra and Chappell, 2011). Moreover, an auto/biographical approach is also about accountability, as researchers we have a responsibility:

...whether the stories we use are our own, or those of our informants... we need to produce ‘accountable knowledge’ and that we owe them (our readers and the larger community) an honesty about ourselves; who we are as characters in our own stories and as actors in our own research... (Katz-Rothman 2007: 1).

Anne: An Auto/Biographical Approach

In my doctoral research I explored teachers’ lives and their professional formation, as I was concerned about the ways in which policy initiatives had resulted in them being positioned as ‘missing persons’ (Evans, 1999: i). I knew from the outset that I wanted to share stories about the teachers that are ‘rarely told’ (Maguire *et al.*, 2011) and I presented my early reflections on this in the thesis, noting that ‘this research started because I was interested in the experiences of teachers like those I had worked with in school, as well as myself’ (Chappell, 2014: 195). Without realising it, or having the relevant knowledge to notice it at the time, my interest in the project was auto/biographical, however it was several years into the research before I could

name it as such. As I became more knowledgeable about auto/biographical approaches in research, I recognised that the challenge was to:

work towards a position that recognises both the personhood of the researcher and the complexity of the researcher/respondent relationship and yet allows for useful things to be said (Letherby, Scott and Williams, 2013: 87).

This repositioning of my thinking resulted in an understanding of my research as ‘principled practice’ (Drew, 2006: 41) where I sought to behave:

... responsibly with a clear commitment to avoid taking a tick box or audit approach to the ethical considerations (MacLure, 2005)...to adopt an approach that supported ethics-in-practice to ensure that I was alert to any issues that arose (Laimputtong, 2007), particularly in relation to researcher power. Aside from the bureaucratic aspect of research ethics, I recognised that my own professional experience as a teacher in a school prior to joining the University, played a major part in the significant sense of responsibility I felt about working with the teachers and re-presenting their data. (Chappell, 2014: 187-188).

As this extract illustrates, the role of my experience in designing the research and the sense of responsibility I had to the participants (Andrews, 2007) became key. In this respect, I also struggled to reconcile some of the terminology that was available in the literature:

...such as subjectivity and objectivity; insider and outsider; identity and subjectivity; structure and agency; resistance and compliance; and actor and subject. It was difficult to work with these since using any one term resulted in the exclusion of the ideas of another: it created a dualism. This was particularly problematic in relation to actor/subject as neither term adequately captured the complexity demonstrated in the data. (Chappell, 2014: 187).

I wanted to centre the teachers in the research but, in addition to the ethical considerations and concepts detailed above, was concerned about how to deal with some of the responses I received from others when I shared my ideas about my methodological approach:

...there was a need to balance the critiques levelled at narrative work as being reductionist in its 'inspection of personal, even private, experience in the search for an interior biographical life' (Atkinson, 2009: 1.2) with my own concerns about taking an approach that took such a broad look at the social that it omitted the individual experience (Craib, 1998) (Chappell, 2014: 190).

In seeking to respond to these critiques and disrupt some of the 'associated assumptions about shared understandings' (Chappell, 2014: 186) by finding ways to work with the terminology, I explored different ways to analyse the accounts and present the teachers' stories. This took a significant amount of time given that:

...an enormous volume of valuable data was generated, which took me by surprise and also presented me with a challenge in how best to work with the data within the scale of the project. There were several ways that I could have presented and explored the findings, indeed I tried different approaches, and this stage in the process was much more complex than anticipated. I wanted to do justice to the teachers' stories, particularly in light of the time they had given to the project (Chappell, 2014: 190).

The challenge came in finding a way to present an academically rigorous analysis that would be defensible in the viva whilst taking account of:

...firstly, the complexity of each individual case and the implications of this complexity for the individual teacher and; secondly, the way in which narrative data such as this can offer us a way of thinking differently about the lives and work of teachers, with obvious interweaving of the personal and professional. (Chappell, 2014: 191).

I wanted to use the teachers' particular individual experiences to illustrate the more general concerns (Evans, 1999). I presented the findings in different ways drawing on Mills' ideas about using private troubles to illustrate public issue (Mills, 1959).

The auto/biographical insights into the lives of teachers provided material for publication but had significant implication for other aspects of my own practice:

As well as providing material for taught sessions, it has also made me reflect on the way in which we work with student teachers and qualified teachers who are at various stages of their teaching career. (Chappell, 2014: 195).

By the end of the process I had come to understand and recognise the critical role played by auto/biography, as both noun and verb and the associated reflexivity, in my development as a researcher as well as the development of the research:

I have been critically reflexive at every stage of the process and attempted to make that explicit throughout the thesis. This reflexivity was necessary, in part because this level of study requires it but, most significantly to fulfil my methodological commitment to this particular research, its focus and design. (Chappell, 2014: 203).

The auto/biographical approach that I took in the research and as a researcher resulted in knowledge about the lives of teachers that could not have been elicited in any other way, as well as having profound implications for my work. It is my experience of learning to think and work auto/biographically that resulted in my part in editing this collection.

Julie: Auto/Biography and Reflexivity

In my doctoral study in order to justify my auto/biographical approach and in light of the second wave feminist slogan, the ‘personal is political’ (Andrews, 2007; Hanisch 2009) I positioned myself as a reflexive feminist researcher and wrote:

that there are tensions within ‘feminism’ as a political movement and that it may be possible to follow feminist research principles without accepting the political underpinnings of feminism, I have a commitment to the Fawcett

Society's mission statement 'a vision of society in which women and men enjoy equality at work, at home and in public life'. For me, being, doing or becoming a feminist is a political act. It signifies an alignment with egalitarian values (Parsons 2014: 26).

I also reflected on previous work I had published regarding feminism, as I stated in the opening paragraph from my article in the *BSA Auto/Biography Yearbook 2010*:

The origins of my own interest in feminism can be traced back to a bookshop in Liverpool at the age of 18, where I saw a copy of Susie Orbach's book 'Fat is a Feminist Issue'. However, it lay dormant and unarticulated until the 1990s, when in another book shop, a women's bookshop in Bristol (long since closed) I bought a series of post cards with Rebecca West's (1892 – 1983) assertion that she did not know what feminism was, only that she was called a feminist when she expressed sentiments that differentiated her 'from a doormat or a prostitute' (Parsons, 2011: 53).

In adopting an auto/biographical approach for my doctoral study I argued that I took:

... great comfort from those who have forged an auto/biographical path before me, such as Erben (1998b), Inckle (2007, 2010), Letherby (1993, 1994), Morgan (1998), Sikes (2006), Sparkes (2002, 2007), Stanley (1992), to name a few that I have met in text and in person along the way. However, it is still difficult to do, for as Pelias (2004: 1) argues, 'the desire to write from the heart' means that the researcher:

...instead of hiding behind the illusion of objectivity, brings himself [sic] forward in the belief that an emotionally vulnerable, linguistically evocative and sensually poetic voice can place us closer to the subjects we wish to study (Pelias, 2004: i), (cited in Parsons 2014: 13).

In the final writing up of the thesis I claimed that 'it was about finding a voice, a way of presenting and positioning the self that pleases the reflexive feminist and ethical researcher in me' (Parsons 2014: 13). Indeed, the final title of my PhD thesis made explicit the methodological and epistemological orientation of my work; *An 'Auto/Biographical approach to exploring relationships with food'* acknowledging the interconnectedness of biography and

autobiography, the other and the self (Parsons 2014, 2015). This enabled an exploration of the individual and the social or the private troubles and public issues concerning food and foodways (Mills, 1959). My relationship with food during my adolescence for example, was influenced by a desire to conform to normative scripts of femininity, as I engaged in talk about food and bodies as a means of ‘doing gender’ (West and Zimmerman, 1987, 2009).

In setting out the aims and objectives of my research I was looking to examine the sameness and difference across ‘our food stories.’ How these ‘stories’ may have changed over the life course, whether they were influenced by gender or health discourses or weight management practices. Indeed, there were two interrelated purposes of my study, firstly to explore the food memories of others, and secondly to critically examine the social and cultural milieu in which these were articulated. In keeping with Mills’ (1959) argument in favour of the ‘sociological imagination’ personal troubles and public issues are interconnected. In the former, memory is considered a creative process with emotions as markers of the construction of the self and agency (Crawford *et al.*, 1992: 126). In the latter, as Lupton claims ‘memories are sociocultural, individual and collective and contain the conditions for self-development, [so that] people grow into their emotions’ (1998: 168). To reiterate, emotion ‘makes a unique contribution to action and agency, without it persons are lost in time with the past a remote and future inaccessible’ (Turner and Stets, 2005: 417). And, as Barbalet (2001: 8) demonstrates an interest in emotion is due to increased individualism, hence an:

autopoietic aggrandisement or development of the self without regards for other selves (a result of market and political individuation isolating self in contained universe) [means the] self [has become] a centre of emotional feeling.

In light of this I explained my position in auto/biographical extracts from the preface written

for my PhD transfer process in the summer of 2012:

I trained as a sociologist in the early 1990s, within a ‘post-modern’, academic climate that appeared to reject notions of objectivity and value-freedom in social science research as potentially unrealistic, if not impossible goals... I found myself working within a scientific paradigm that valued reflexivity and interpretative approaches to research... sociologists, such as Giddens (1992) and Beck (1992) challenged the idea of a fixed and stable identity. They emphasised notions of reflexivity and the negotiation of the ‘self’ within a context of shifting boundaries in which the ‘meta-narratives’ of modernity and the founding fathers of sociology; Mark, Weber and Durkheim were being dissolved...

...All of these notions fed in to a general milieu of relativity; there were no fixed, dogmatic rules of engagement in (or with) the social world. The self was merely a free-floating product of consumption and the ontological insecurity that was bound up with this, seemed fine to me. It was against this background that I began my doctoral study, therefore there will be, a representation of the self as researcher in relation to the respondents, interplay between biography and autobiography, an exploration of the lives of the researched and the researcher and an inter-textual analysis of the whole process. For me the research process has and should always be a reflexive endeavour... (Parsons 2014: 42).

Indeed, I continue to be committed to research as a reflexive endeavour. Latterly this has entailed less in terms of auto/biographical reflection and more in terms of a commitment to giving voice to those with whom I am working (Parsons 2019, 2018a, 2018b, 2017b, Parsons and Hocking 2017, Parsons and Pettinger 2017). In an attempt to prioritise the voice of research respondents I have made use of ‘i-poems’ (Parsons 2017b), photographs (Parsons 2019, Parsons 2018b and Parsons and Pettinger 2017) and food (Parsons 2017a, Parsons 2018a).

In terms of the use of food and food memories in my doctoral study, Morgan (1996: 166) explains how ‘food represents a particularly strong form of anchorage in the past [as it] serves as one of the links between historical time, individual time and household time’. Thus, foodways are, also as Scott (2009: 106) claims, ‘so embedded in the domestic cultures of

everyday life that they come to be regarded as natural'. There is moreover a persistent tension between 'knowing' oneself and the creation of memory. For Deleuze and Guattari (1998) memory is the membrane that allows for the correspondence between the 'sheets of the past and the layers of reality', it is a block of becoming, as Clough (2007: 29) claims:

we write not with childhood memories but through blocs of childhood that are [always part of] becoming the child of the present'. We move backwards and forwards to locate a 'self', one that is 'an autobiographical-techno-ontological writing block (Clough, 2007: 15).

However, my doctoral study was not just an exploration of the epistemological orientation of my approach, it also made reference to auto/biography as a research practice. When writing up my research I noted that:

I explicitly position myself in terms of a 'theorised subjectivity' (Letherby 2013: 80) and engage in a 'constant, critical interrogation of [my] personhood – both intellectual and personal – within the knowledge production process'. I apply a critical lens to all aspects of the research process from its design to data collection, analysis and dissemination. (Parsons 2014: 77).

Moreover, in this regard I argued that:

It is important for me that research should be guided by feminist principles of 'collaboration, reciprocity and disclosure' (Kralik et al., 2000: 909). This is because these principles are essential elements in an auto/biographical approach to research, as the researcher is inseparable from the data. This is not to assume that there is only one feminist perspective... a feminist approach to research is 'respectful of respondents' whilst acknowledging the subjective involvement of the researcher (Letherby, 2003: 5). It is usual to consider the power relationships implicit in the research process and attempt to redress this power imbalance. It is about being sensitive to the needs of those being researched. As Letherby (2003: 6) argues, 'we need to be sensitive to respondents and the relevance of our own presence in their lives and the research process'(Parsons 2014: 94).

Hence, ‘objectivity’ is replaced by ‘reflexive subjectivity and the politics of position’ (Grbich, 2004: 28-29) or theorised subjectivity (Letherby 2013). These concerns therefore became central to my doctoral study and analysis of the data. Indeed, according to Liamputtong (2007: 17):

...self-reflexivity requires an awareness of the self in the process of creating knowledge and requires researchers to clarify how they construct their beliefs (a process of self revelation) and how these beliefs influence their data collection... the emotions and personal transformation resulting from self-reflexivity are essential components of her feminist research project.

For me reflexivity is an important aspect of adopting an auto/biographical approach. I am committed to auto/biography and the myriad ways in which it is applied.

Auto/Biography and Arts-Based Practices

It is no accident that scholars committed to auto/biography often adopt participatory and/or arts-based practices in their work. The BSA A/B study group has long been a useful forum for music, song, poetry and performance in the interests of pursuing and promoting the voices of others and selves. Moreover, there has been a recent resurgence in interest in approaches that value the participant’s voice, particularly in health research, which is partly motivated by an explicit requirement by funding bodies (in the United Kingdom at least) for public and patient involvement (PPI) (Cook 2012). Moreover, many of the issues faced by those committed to arts-based approaches are also applicable to auto/biography.

Indeed auto/biography as a field as previously noted incorporates issues to do with reflexivity and ethics. These are also issues which may be addressed through participatory styles of research and creative/arts-based methods, which are adopted in order to give research respondents a voice to address, challenge and rebalance power relationships (Clarke *et al.*,

2005; Coad *et al.*, 2009; Parsons and Pettinger 2017, Poudrier and MacLean, 2009). The use of creative/art-based methods is ‘an emerging qualitative research approach [that] refers to the use of any art form (or combinations thereof) at any point in the research process (Cole and Knowles 2001; Knowles and Cole 2008) in generating, interpreting, and/or communicating knowledge’ (cited in Boydell *et al* 2012). It is argued that incorporating creative/art-based resources within the research process promotes dialogue and storytelling (Jones 2006). Further that knowledge conceptualised in this way is more accessible to diverse stakeholders (Colantonio *et al* 2008). Moreover, Boydell *et al.* (2012: 30) carried out a scoping review of literature on the topic and conclude that creative/arts-based methods provide:

1. an opportunity for enhanced engagement for participants and audiences alike (e.g. Levin *et al.*, 2007);
2. a way to enrich communication and make research accessible beyond academia (e.g. Colantonio *et al.*, 2008); and,
3. a method for facilitating conversation and reflection during individual interviews, generating data beyond what was considered the normal scope of most interview-based methods alone (e.g. Dyches *et al.*, 2004; Oliffe and Bottorff 2007).

Conclusion

In auto/biography when adopting participatory and/or creative/arts-based approaches the emphasis is on research ‘with’ rather than doing research ‘on’ people (Reason and Bradbury 2001). Moreover, as previously stated auto/biography emphasises the importance of democracy, equality, flexibility and reflexivity in the research process, which changes the nature of the traditional research relationship, and can make the researcher more of ‘an outsider in the academic community’ (Bergold and Thomas 2012). Indeed, this insider/outsider dilemma is a common theme within auto/biography and is explored within some of the chapters of this handbook. Overall, this handbook demonstrates some of the ways in which researchers, academics and lay people use auto/biography to present and position themselves, to make and

re-make their own and others' lives and identities.

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